

crooked letter 3: *Slippery Docks and Thickening Spaces*

My sister and her husband came up from Lakeland, and we all went out to breakfast. It had been a while since I had seen her in between all the hurricanes and a dentist breaking her jaw while pulling out her wisdom teeth. It was good to see her.

My sister and I have very different takes on the world despite sharing a miserable childhood with a crazy momma and growing up poor. She believes that hard work will be rewarded, that shopping is a fun way to spend time and that making money is very important. I don't challenge my sister much, though I will admit that I occasionally slip out some of my less than mainstream ideas and sometimes in not the most diplomatic manner.

My sister works for a banking firm heavily invested in the credit card industry. Her livelihood is dependent on the fortunes of that industry. I think as well of credit card companies as I do insurance companies, which means that I think they are some of the lowest life forms on earth. But then again I don't want to insult bacteria.

At breakfast we had an exchange about that industry. My sister was complaining of not having enough to do at work. She went to her managers, and they were very happy to award her brownie points for being so diligent. This is a smart move on my sister's part because the bank is merging with another bank. To keep your job during a merger you need to prove that either the position is indispensable or better yet that you are indispensable.

Now I find this galling because it falls to individual employees to shift as best they can in the face of corporate power plays. Prudently, I did not offer my critique of corporate work practices, since we *were* talking about her, and it is not nice to push someone out of the spotlight just so you can get on your high horse. But I was irritated. So when my sister praised the president of one of the merging banks for his bucking the corporate trend of outsourcing everything, I made the mistake of making a more than slightly negative assessment of that industry.

There is a point when you can feel a shift in the distance and space between yourself and another person. Sometimes the distance narrows; it becomes easier to listen and to be heard. Other times the space between thickens, and it is as if the words have to travel through ice. No one is heard.

The space thickened.

Later on, I told her I was going to facilitate a meeting on the "criminalization of poverty." She gave me the look that she uses when she wants to disengage herself from the conversation. It is the same look that we both use with our mother when we don't want to get drawn in. For this to work, you don't completely ignore the other person, but you respond with a blank face and an emotionless voice. It might be needless to say, but it drives me crazy when my sister does this me. Perhaps she would have been more

interested if I hadn't taken a whack at her means of livelihood at breakfast, but that is doubtful. I was left with that out to sea feeling I get when I realize that I am speaking another language. I'm not interested in converting her. But I do sometimes feel that I am invisible.

The meeting was put on by Critical Resistance, a national organization that opposes racism & classism by advocating for the abolishment of the prison system. There were four presenters, who did a good job of presenting the facts without a lot of rhetoric. Afterwards there floor was open for public comment; I was there to help with this part of the event. The conversation was fairly congenial, though I wouldn't say it was free of the perhaps inevitable tensions of race and class and life experience that come up at these kinds of things.

At one point I asked how many people in the room believed that poverty was being criminalized. As far as I could tell, every one of the 40 or so people there agreed with the central premise of the meeting. The participants shared a language and overlapping though not identical frames of reference about social issues.

It is important to have forums where we aren't constantly defending our core beliefs; where the discussion starts from an agreement such as "poverty is being criminalized. But I want to know how to talk to people like my sister. (I say people like my sister because I realize that there are more than political differences thickening the space between the two of us). People who grew up poor, and because of luck, hard work and in some cases, white privilege they are no longer poor. But "white privilege" is another bit of jargon that draws a blank look.

Folks on the left are good at dissecting the powers that be but not so good at talking to people where they are at. We have a hard time talking to the "unbelievers," especially people clinging to the dream of making it big despite overwhelming evidence that they have a snowball's chance in hell. The attitude that I have encountered numerous times is "No good, self respecting, intelligent person could choose honestly believe X." We forget that we once believed X despite being intelligent, self respecting, good people.

We forget that our own beliefs are built on the same slowly shifting sands of ideas. I'm going to use a big word that I don't think gets used enough, ideology. All of us are wrapped up in ideologies. Ideology is powerful. I grew into my beliefs about the world and those beliefs have changed over time and will continue to change. There was a time I would have found much of the terminology I now use alienating mumbo jumbo.

It took time for me to be disillusioned. It took time for me to understand and accept as truth that America was founded on the backs of slaves and the blood drenched lands of Native peoples; that America is an imperialist country; that workers are rapidly losing the little gains they made in the 20th Century; that Bush is a liar, but most of our presidents have been; that the Democrats and the Republicans are equally in the pocket of big business; that our civil liberties being trampled is nothing new; that our prison system is

essentially re-institutionalized slavery; that feminism and civil rights are losing ground. Disillusionment is painful.

In the face of an election map of Florida that showed Alachua County as a blue island of Democratic voters in a sea of red Republicans, it seems even more vital that we learn how to talk to people. It is easy to assume that all those “rednecks” are stupid. It is easy to feel superior about our “educated” understanding of the world. It is funny to joke about moving to Canada or Europe where people are “more enlightened.”

What are we offering people besides our despair, besides our cynicism? I sometimes feel that the Left is like the neighbor in an *Anne of Green Gables* novel that delights in spreading bad news. We spend most of our time rubber necking at the scene of the “accident” and then gossiping about it later. We love a good funeral. We are scandalized by people who accept many but not all of our beliefs. The Presbyterians can’t stand the Methodists; the socialists can’t stand the anarchists and neither can stand the liberals. We are stiff necked and unwelcoming to strangers. We condemn the unbelievers and fund missionary work to save ignorant heathens. Few of us take the time to talk to those objectified others; the heathens that still believe America is the best nation on earth.

I understand why my sister works where she does. I understand why she plays the game; why she wants to make money. I don’t mean this in a patronizing way. In my social circle it isn’t cool to admit this, but at times, I wish I was a bit more like my sister because I am tired of being poor, and I wish I could believe in the American dream.

It is often easier to face someone who completely disagrees with you than someone with whom you have slippery places of agreement and disagreement. Trying to discuss social and political issues with my sister is like walking on a dock that is sturdy but covered in wet algae. I have to be careful. Too often I fall on my ass. But these bruise-worthy conversations need to happen, maybe not between my sister and me but with people like her. We have to remember that our despair was wrought by believing in many of the same ideals those “heathens” believe are actually practiced by America. We cannot just be bearers of bad news. We have to brave slippery docks and spaces that narrow and thicken precipitously.